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EDITORIAL: The virtues of coal-fired power

Sierra Pacific Resources, parent of Nevada Power Co. of Clark County and Sierra Pacific Power Co. of Reno, announced a bold plan Monday to build a new coal-fired power plant complex near Ely, along with a north-south transmission line to bring that power to Southern Nevada.

The plan bravely places the long-term needs of the company's customers for reasonably priced energy above the fear mongering of environmentalists, who will never find anything to like about coal.

Old-fashioned coal-fired generation was, indeed, "dirty." It generated not only particulates -- the heavy brown smog that famously caused 19th century London to be nicknamed "the Big Smoke" -- but plenty of less visible pollutants, from nitrogen oxide to sulfur dioxide.

But technologies improve. Sierra Pacific says its Ely generating stations (two are planned) would use "supercritical" technology to burn coal more cleanly and efficiently at higher temperatures, and that two 500-megawatt coal gasification plants would follow at the site once that technology becomes commercially viable.

The whole idea is to reduce the local power companies' reliance on natural gas, the price of which has soared in recent years. Coal generation is considerably cheaper than gas or oil-fired plants, with only wind power (and nuclear -- if plant construction costs are ignored) being comparable.

The new transmission line also would ease the eventual construction of wind power farms in eastern Nevada, according to Sierra Pacific executive Walt Higgins.

Environmental extremists complain that reducing nitrogen oxide and sulfur dioxide emissions with new coal technologies aren't enough because coal plants continue to emit large amounts of carbon dioxide, the common, nontoxic gas that animals exhale when they breathe.

They also warn that, even though domestic coal fields could meet our energy needs for hundreds of years amid unease about the nation's dependence on foreign oil, the cost of coal generation could soon go up far enough to end its competitive advantage.

Such a warning can be misleading, though. Coal opponents refer not to any anticipated, market-driven price hikes based on short supplies or higher production costs. Rather, they hope their political allies will intervene, passing measures like the McCain-Lieberman Climate Stewardship Act, designed to effectively "fine" coal-fired plants the equivalent of \$8 for each ton of carbon dioxide emitted in 2010, rising to \$13 per ton in 2020 -- a step the Natural Resources Defense Council hopes would push the price of new coal generation up by about a penny per kilowatt-hour.

Sierra Pacific deserves credit for shrugging off such political threats and putting its customers first.

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